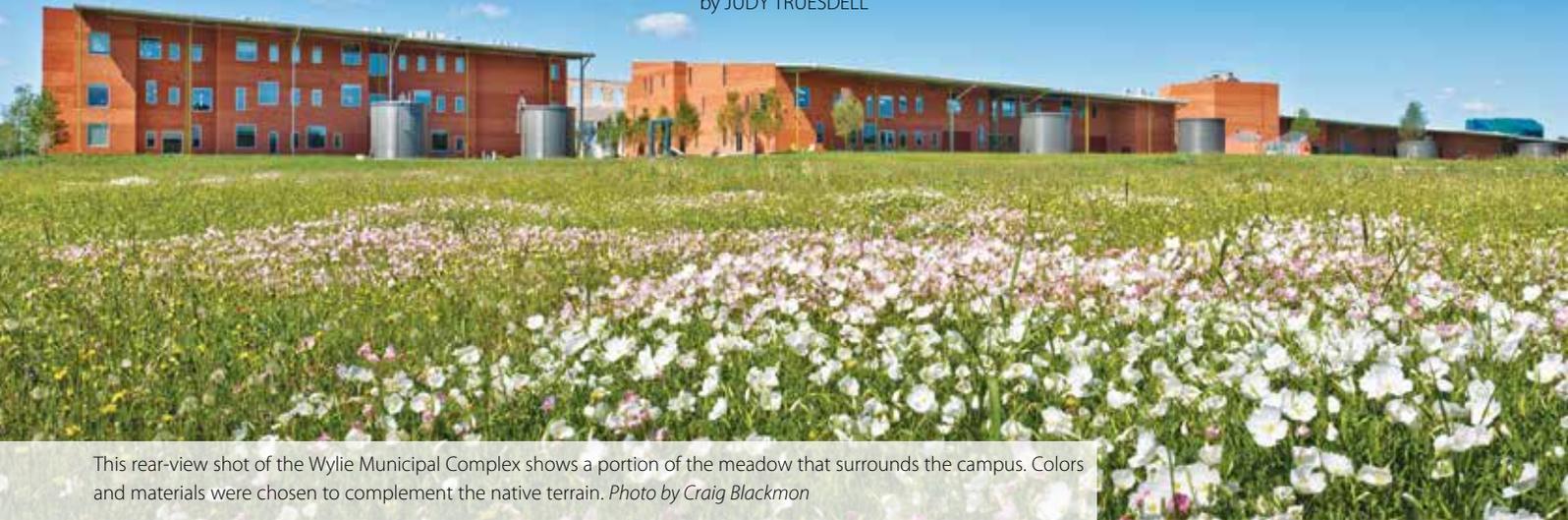




# Wylie Embraces **Natural Resources** in Municipal Complex Design

## *City Working with Naturalists to Preserve Prairie*

by JUDY TRUESDELL



This rear-view shot of the Wylie Municipal Complex shows a portion of the meadow that surrounds the campus. Colors and materials were chosen to complement the native terrain. *Photo by Craig Blackmon*

**Preservation of open space** is the heart of Wylie's architectural-award-winning municipal complex. Rising out of the more than 330 acres of open meadows and trees, the 140,000-square-foot community gathering place for Wylie's 45,000 residents houses City Hall, the Smith Library and Wylie Recreation Center. Architects designed the complex to mirror the gentle curves of the onsite creek that Caddo Indians once used as a trade route and where deer, wild hogs and bobcats have been known to run. The unique design incorporates colors and materials that complement the natural landscape, including regionally quarried Permian Sea Coral limestone. Highlighting this open space is a 22-acre portion of the rapidly diminishing Blackland Prairie, and city staff members and volunteer naturalists are working to restore it to its natural state.

### **In the Beginning**

The process that led to this unique preserve began in 2002, when a commissioned study recommended that Wylie add 200 more acres for low-impact recreation to accommodate the coming population growth. When a longtime Wylie family offered 200 acres for sale, the city pursued it. Mayor Eric Hogue, a councilman at the time, remembers the family's request. "The Wells family was in favor of selling their property to the city. They supported the idea of a public space on their land rather than housing," Hogue said. Following that purchase, the city obtained adjacent parkland to the west.

Voters approved bond funds in 2005, and following the selection of architects and the



Volunteers have created a half-mile mulch trail near Wylie's Rita and Truett Smith Public Library, one of the three buildings housed at the municipal complex. *Photo by Carmen Powlen*

finalization of plans, construction on the \$44 million complex began in 2008. Throughout the process, members of Council were adamant that the area around the buildings remain as natural as possible. They emphasized the many benefits of green space, including reduction of the urban heat-island effect, soil erosion prevention and improved drainage. Members were guided by studies showing that citizens are happier in communities that provide a place for them to connect to the natural world through recreation, exercise and play. From a fiscal standpoint, green spaces can have a positive effect on community real estate values, leading to higher tax revenues.

In 2010, Wylie City Council members made their philosophy official by adopting an

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open space plan that included a low-impact scenario designed to “tread lightly on the land” and provided an area for habitat protection and an abundance of green space.

Although the city had long valued its ball fields and other areas for organized play, stakeholders embraced the concept of a community gathering place, one that provided a link with nature, an opportunity for study and a pastoral backdrop for activities. “What if the rec center held yoga or karate classes outside?” Hogue remembered asking. “What if the library had a mobile bookshelf, and visitors went outside to read? These were the scenarios we envisioned.”

City employees moved into the new complex in early 2011, and the community immediately embraced the indoor oppor-

tunities presented by the library and recreation center. However, Parks and Recreation Superintendent Rob Diaz said providing an outdoor option for visitors to the complex soon became a main goal. “There’s a synergy between the library and rec center, and we saw the need to provide outside opportunities,” he said.

### Blackland Prairie Restoration Project

The complex sits on a portion of the Blackland Prairie, a 15 million-acre stretch of dark, rich soil that reaches from the Red River on the north to San Antonio on the south. The prairie was once part of an extensive and complex ecosystem, home to 50 million bison, an array of small wildlife including rabbits, moles, lizards and turtles, and hundreds of species of birds.

The fertile nature of the soil led to its demise. When farmers discovered the rich earth, they settled there and planted crops, ultimately destroying the prairie as a natural habitat. Less than 1 percent remains, making it one of the most endangered ecosystems in North America.

In keeping with the city’s commitment to maintaining the natural landscape, the Wylie Parks and Recreation Division partnered with the Blackland Prairie Chapter of the Texas Master Naturalists to restore approximately

Naturalist Dave Powell visits the prairie to see what plants are thriving. The property was once part of the Blackland Prairie, an endangered ecosystem. *Photo by Carmen Powlen*



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Dave Powell, with the Texas Master Naturalists, and Shohn Rogers, city of Wylie parks manager, meet in the prairie to discuss restoration efforts. Photo by Carmen Powlen



22 acres of the city-owned property to its natural condition.

Overseeing the project is volunteer Dave Powell, a certified trail guide and contract educator at the Heard Natural Science Museum & Wildlife Sanctuary in McKinney and immediate past president of the local naturalists chapter. In the spring of 2012, following Wylie City Council's approval of the project, Powell and his volunteers got to work, scattering 10 pounds of grass seed, purchased by the city. "We're trying to play nature and do as much as we can without machines," he said. They started to see results in fall of 2013, when native plants such as sideoats grama, the state grass of Texas, began to take hold. "We were surprised. This was more progress than we anticipated," Powell said, noting that the fall would have been a more ideal time to plant.

Volunteers continue to remove invasive and imported plants, such as Johnson grass, King Ranch bluestem, Bermuda grass and woody plants, while replacing them with native prairie grasses, such as big bluestem, buffalo grass, little bluestem and switchgrass.

Powell said seeds from native plants found on the property have a better success rate. To collect seeds, paper bags are put over the drying seed heads, which are gently shaken.

"If the seeds come off, they were ready to be harvested," Powell explained. Other naturalist groups also have contributed seeds to the restoration project from nearby fields.

Using soil from the Wylie complex, Powell grew about 100 plants from native seed, planting them in biodegradable paper towel tubes and growing them on his home patio. "I wanted to see how the young sprouts looked so I could identify them when they begin to pop up in the prairie," he said. The tubes were returned to the municipal center grounds and planted in test plots, marked with red flags.

Although the process is slow, signs of restoration are visible. "We're starting to see more little animals, more rodent trails," Powell said. "They've found safe places to make their homes, among the bunch grasses. They're part of the natural cycle — coyotes roam the prairies, as well as bobcats, armadillos — hawks are looking for rodents, which helps control that population. We hope to see some grass snakes, good little snakes that eat rodents. It's all part of maintaining the life cycle."

Powell said patience is key. He visits the meadows twice a week for about three hours, removing unwanted plant life for about an hour and a half, and then just walking around, seeing what's grown and taking photos. He admits he's not likely to see the project fully restored — it may take as long as 50 years. "We're watching and waiting, letting nature take its course."

## Public Perception

Park department personnel wanted to make sure the restoration project didn't appear, to visitors or members of the community, to be merely unmowed, unkempt property. Signage was placed in key locations — small at first, then more prominent — that announces "Prairie Restoration in Progress." Also, as the prairie became more robust, 15- to 20-foot swaths of land facing the two major streets were mowed. "It provides a border, a sort of landscape buffer, that looks clean," Diaz said.

Steps were also taken to keep the public informed. The parks and recreation depart-

ment publishes an activity magazine each season, and the restoration project was featured on the cover of the winter/spring 2015 issue, along with a story explaining the process. *The Connection*, a magazine published by the Wylie Chamber of Commerce, also included a story in its June/July issue.

Overall, members of the community have reacted favorably. Wylie Parks Manager Shohn Rodgers said, "I can't think of one complaint that I've received about it. Citizens have called me to ask how they can help."

## Opportunities for Learning

In addition to already-scheduled indoor activities that may move outside to the prairie, the grounds provide unique opportunities for education. Wylie secured \$415,000 in grant funding from Collin County and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to construct a 1-mile-long, 12-foot-wide hike and bike concrete trail that loops the property.

Naturalist volunteers have created an additional half-mile natural mulch trail that bisects the restoration project and connects with the paved pathway. With the start of the 2015-2016 academic year, efforts will begin in earnest, Diaz said, to let local schools, churches and Scout troops know the trails are complete. The master naturalists are also available for tours and lectures.

A water conservation garden, created in partnership with the North Texas Municipal Water District, is located in the breezeway between the recreation center and library. Landscaped with drought-friendly plants, signage provides information about the greenery as well as instructions on how to create a sustainable garden. Some selections are samples of the natural grasses that can be viewed in the prairie restoration project.

"We've only begun to tap the resources offered by this unique piece of North Texas natural history," Hogue said. "We're dedicated to creating a community gathering place, Wylie's version of New York City's Central Park, where our citizens and visitors can meet and celebrate the natural heritage of the city of Wylie." ★